

SLINGS AND ARROWS

By HUGH CONWAY.

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CHAPTER III.
FIRST LOVE.

It was about this time, I think, that such training as Mr. Loraine had indirectly given me began to bear its first full crop of fruit. When first I stepped into the world the novelty and freshness of all I saw had kept the evil which I had imbibed in the background. But now that I was a man, now that the glamour with which a boy surrounds everything had faded away, much of Mr. Loraine's teachings, many of his cynical axioms, came back, perhaps unawares, to me. The certainty which he had always felt as to some selfish motive being the hidden mainspring in every action of man or woman, with me became at least suspicion. I had already met with false friends, who had, under the guise of friendship, robbed me not only of money, but of what I valued more—trust in my fellows. After awhile I began to persuade myself that such popularity as I enjoyed was not due to my own merits, but to my worldly possessions; that I was by no means a fine fellow—merely a young man of large property.

This feeling is a danger which continually besets a rich and sensitive man, especially if his companions are poorer than himself, and his own nature is not such as can accept flattery as his due. Under such circumstances it is easy to develop much of the cynicism of Julian Loraine.

Women had as yet done nothing to lower my self-esteem. Until now, I had not found the woman I could love. One reason for this was, that I was still of a romantic nature, and was resolved that whomsoever I asked to be my wife should love me for myself—not for my money.

I wish, so far as possible, to keep this tale free from any sarcastic remarks of my own, but at that time I often wondered if the mothers of fair young daughters would have found me such a charming fellow had not Julian Loraine made that brief visit.

But at last I was in love—hopelessly, unreservedly in love. My nature is, I believe, a passionate one, and now that I had found its aim, I gave it full and free scope. I loved madly, blindly, and, alas! jealously.

I had set my heart upon no daughter of a wealthy or well-born family. The girl I loved was not one whom I met in society; yet I proudly thought of the day when every eye would turn and be dazzled by her beauty—when people who appraised the charms of fair women would rank those of my wife above all.

Of course I was partial—all lovers are—but now, as I glance from my paper to the portrait which hangs on the wall facing me, I tell myself that my love did not lead me far astray.

The soft, thick fair hair growing low down on the forehead, and swept back over the ear to join the knotted, silky mass at the back of the head. The head itself, small, well-shaped, and, above all, well poised. The large, soft, dark blue eyes, straight, not curved—falling, when the eyes are closed, literally on the cheek. The girlish, yet perfect figure. Ah! I need not look at the portrait to recall and describe my love!

For the rest, her name was Viola Keith. She was an orphan, and all but alone.

How I met her, where I met her, matters little. Nearly all first meetings take place under prosaic circumstances. Anyway, as my eyes met hers, I told myself that I looked at the one woman whom it was possible for me to love with an eternal love.

I knew nothing of her family or her surroundings. I cared to know nothing. One question only I asked myself: Can I win her, and win her for my own sake? Here, even here, in the first flush of my new love, suspicion of motive must be guarded against.

So when, at last, I was able to tell her what name I bore, I changed it, and called myself Mr. Julian Vane. She should, if she loved me, marry me, thinking she was marrying one in her own station of life.

Not that her station was anything to be ashamed of. So far as I could gather, she was one of the many whose parents leave their children a slender provision, yet large enough to live upon in respectability and comfort. Viola, I found, lived in a small house, with a prim old dame, the pink of dignity and propriety, and who had formerly been the girl's schoolmistress; a solitary, lonely life it must have been for the girl.

I laughed as I thought how, if she loved me, I would draw her from her dull home and show her the great world and the glories thereof.

How was I to woo her? We were not likely to meet at any mutual friend's house. I had no sister, cousin or any one who could do me a friendly turn in the matter. Yet every moment of suspense would be an age to me. I must do something.

So one day I waited until I saw Viola leave the house. I watched her tall, graceful form pass out of sight, and with a great effort repressed my desire to follow her. Then I walked to her house and requested to see Miss Rossiter, the prim old maiden lady aforesaid.

I told her in plain words the object of my calling. I spoke frankly of my great love for her companion, and I begged that my hearer would aid me to remove obstacles which stood in the way of a closer intercourse. No doubt, with a lover's cunning, I made myself most agreeable to the ancient gentlewoman. Permission was graciously accorded me to visit at the house—as a friend.

I wanted no more. I rose to take my leave, longing for to-morrow to come, as I did not like to venture two visits on the first day. Just then the door opened and Viola appeared.



Just then Viola appeared.

A look of surprise flashed into her face—surprise, but not displeasure. A faint blush crossed her cheek, and these signs told me I should win her.

Now that my foot was inside the citadel, I went to work fiercely, impudently, to gain my desire. The days that followed are to me too sacred to be described; but not many passed before I knew that Viola's love was my own.

We went to the kindly spinster who was responsible for Viola's safety and told her the glad news. The old lady dropped her knitting needles and looked bewildered.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried in horrified tones; "you cannot mean it!"

Viola's blush and my words showed her we were in solemn earnest.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" sighed Miss Rossiter. "What shall I do? You have only known each other a week!"

"A day would have been long enough on my part!" I cried, looking rapturously at my lovely Viola.

"It is so sudden," continued Miss Rossiter. "I never dreamed of such a thing. In old days matters were managed much more decorously. I thought, Mr. Vane, you would be at least three months in making her acquaintance. Oh, dear! I am much to blame!"

The old soul seemed so distressed that Viola ran over and kissed her.

"Oh! what will Eustace say? He will blame me terribly. He is so masterful, you know, Viola."

"Who is Eustace?" I asked. I thought that Viola's face grew thoughtful as she heard the name.

"Mr. Grant, my guardian and good friend," she said.

"Then I must see him. Where can I find him?"

"He is away," said Miss Rossiter, plaintively. "Oh, I am so much to blame! I ought to have made all sorts of inquiries about you, Mr. Vane."

"Your friend can make them on his return. When will that be?"

"No one knows. To-morrow, perhaps; next month, next year. One never can say. Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

I laughed and drew Viola away. We were so happy that we forgot all about Miss Rossiter's plaintive sighs, and I did not even ask what manner of man he was.

But two days afterward I knew. In the evening I called as usual at Miss Rossiter's. Viola heard my knock and met me in the hall.

"Eustace came back to-day. He is here now," she said joyfully.

I kissed her and followed her into the room to make the acquaintance of her guardian.

Although she had called him by his Christian name, I fully expected to find him a sober, middle-aged man; but in the easy chair, lounging as if the place belonged to him, and talking volubly to Miss Rossiter, I saw a strongly-built, sunburned man who could be but few years my senior. He rose as I entered and Viola shyly introduced us.

He was tall—taller than I was. His shoulders were broad; his limbs long and muscular. A man who, if not handsome, would certainly be noticed anywhere. The thought which succeeded my astonishment at his unexpected appearance was, "By what right is this man the guardian of the woman I love?"

He gave me his hand; but not, I fancied, cordially. He looked me full in the face, and I knew that he was trying to gather from my looks some knowledge of myself. Then suddenly I saw a surprised expression on his face—saw the corners of his mouth droop as in half-suppressed scorn; and from that moment my feelings toward him were those of mistrust and dislike.

He said so late that I was the one to make the first move. For once I was not sorry to leave Viola. The appearance of this man among us, the close terms of intimacy upon which it was clear he stood with Miss Rossiter and Viola, cast a kind of gloom upon me. I chafed at the thought that my happiness was in any way dependent upon his favor. I grew moody and silent, and for me the evening was a dull one.

But not for my friends. This Grant was evidently a brilliant and clever talker. He narrated, in an amusing way, his experiences in some out of the way Alpine village in which, for some reason which did not transpire, he had been staying. Yet at times I fancied that his merriment was forced, and again and again I saw his keen eyes turned on me with a searching glance, which annoyed me beyond measure.

When at last I rose, he followed my example. Viola, as was her custom, accompanied me to the door of the house, but this evening I noticed, or fancied I noticed, a certain reluctance and hesitation in her manner. Eustace Grant passed on in front of us. He opened the door and stood on the step. I lingered for a moment to bid Viola a last good night.

Presently Grant turned, as if impatient at my delay. There was a lamp exactly opposite the house and the hall was also illuminated. I could, therefore, see the man's face distinctly, and there was an indescribable look in his eyes which told me the whole truth. This Eustace Grant, whoever he was, loved Viola even as I loved her! All my jealous and mistrustful nature surged to the surface. I grasped Viola's hand and hastily drew her into a little sitting-room close by. She looked at me in a startled manner.

"Viola," I said, "who is this man?"

"Dearest, I told you; Eustace Grant, my guardian."

"Who is he? what is his profession?"

"Ah! that is a secret as yet. He will tell you some day; for, Julian, you will love him like a brother when you know him."

"Never! Listen, Viola. That man is in love with you!"

She made no answer, and by the light which passed through the half-opened door I saw a soft expression of pity and regret upon her sweet face.

"You know it?" I asked.

She sighed. "I am afraid it is so, or has been so. Poor Eustace!"

The intonation of the last two words carried comfort to my heart. It told me that I need fear no rival. I embraced Viola, and left her. Grant was still on the doorstep. He was evidently waiting for me. I paused in the road, looking out for a vacant house.

"Do you mind walking a little distance with me, Mr. Vane?" said Grant.

"I have some distance to go. I would rather drive."

"I will not take you far, but I have something I must say to you."

He turned in an authoritative manner, as though fully expecting I should follow him. I hesitated, then joined him, and we walked side by side.

There was frigid silence between us; but as I glanced at the tall, manly figure by my side, as now and again by the light of the gas lamps I saw that powerful, striking face, the demon of self-distrust began to rise again. How, I asked myself, could it be possible, all things being equal, for a woman to choose me in preference to this man? And thanks to my concealing my name and true position the chances apparently were that Grant had as much to offer a woman as I had.

By and bye my companion stopped and opened the door of a house with a latch key. He invited me to enter, and showed me into a room on the ground floor. Once inside his own house his manner changed. He was now host and I was a guest. He apologized for the state of confusion which reigned in the room. He had only returned to his lodgings yesterday, and had not yet got things straight. The room, although plainly furnished, showed that its tenant was a man of taste and culture. Books were scattered broadcast, here, there and everywhere. Grant swept a pile off the chair which he offered me.

"You smoke?" he said, producing a cigar.

"Yes," I answered, and lit it.

"I can give you some brandy and soda, too."

He opened the cupboard and brought out the bottles. I declined his proffered hospitality, and awaited his communication. He stood with his back to the mantel-piece, and mechanically filled a pipe. He did not, however, light it; and, although I looked as carelessly as I could in another direction, I knew that he was attentively scanning my face. This scrutiny became unbearable.

"You have something to say to me, Mr. Grant?" I remarked.

"Yes. I am only considering how to say it. I am something of a physiognomist, and have been studying your face for my guidance."

I smiled scornfully, but said no more. He was welcome to look at me all night if he chose to do so. Suddenly, in a sharp, abrupt way, he spoke.

"Why are you passing under a false name?" he asked.

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave, When first we practice to deceive!"

The attack was so unexpected that I crimsoned, and for a moment was speechless. I knew that my true motive for the concealment was, in respect to Viola, if unworthily conceived, at least free from evil. This thought strengthened me, and I was able to face my interrogator. But, all the same, it was a great mortification to feel that in order to explain matters to this man I must, as it were, lay bare my most sensitive feelings.

"You know my true name?" I asked.

"No. But I have seen you somewhere—Vienna, Paris—I forget where. Then you were not called Vane."

"My name is Julian Loraine."

"Julian Loraine," he repeated, musingly. "I have heard that name in the world, and with little good attached to it. But it could not have referred to yourself. You are too young. But your reason for the deception? Speak!" he said fiercely.

I curbed my rising anger, and, as well as I could, told him why I had wooed Viola under a false name. I think he believed me, but I saw scorn on his face as he listened.

"The act of a fool," he said. "Mr. Loraine, such romantic affairs should be left to poets and novelists. Viola Keith would need neither riches nor poverty with the man she loved. I tell you, if I were to go to-morrow and make known to her your doubt of her single-heartedness, I could shatter the whole fabric of your happiness. Why should I not do so?"

"It would be the act of a fiend," I said.

He laughed, not pleasantly. "Yes, it would. I will not do it. I will even keep your secret, and let you carry out your ridiculous plan. But I will also do this: I will follow you on your wedding morning, and see with my own eyes that you have married Miss Keith in your right name."

"No!" he said, seeing I was ready to spring from my seat in indignation. "No! I will have no protest. You have brought this upon yourself. You have given me the right to mistrust you."

"Will you be good enough to show me the right by which you interfere at all?" I said.

"Until her twenty-first birthday I am Miss Keith's guardian."

"A very young one," I sneered.

"Yes, but older than you think. Her mother died six years ago. I was then 30; she thought me old enough to be her child's guardian, and I will see the trust to the end."

The meaning thrown into the last sentence did not escape me. It implied that he still viewed me with distrust. My anger was thoroughly aroused.

"Perhaps, Mr. Grant," I said, "there is a nearer and dearer right you wish to exercise over your ward—one which she herself alone can bestow."

He drew himself up to his full height. "That, sir," he said, calmly, "is ungenerous. I had hoped that my love for Miss Keith was a matter unknown to all save myself. I love her as it may be beyond your power to love a woman. I would lay down my life for her far more easily than to-day I lay down my love. Yet I do this, and to you, my rival, can say: 'Take her, and make her happy—make her happy!'"

The repetition of the last three words was not a wish; it was a command, a threat.

Grant was still standing above me, and as I looked at him I saw that his face was pale, and on his forehead were drops of moisture. His appearance almost startled me; but I said nothing. I rose and wished him good-night. Somehow, in spite of the dislike with which the man had inspired me, there was about him a strength and dignity which impressed me more than I cared to own. He accompanied me to the door. When it closed, I paused for a moment to light one of my own cigars. Then I crossed the road. As I did so, I glanced back. The gas was burning in the room which I had just left; the blind was drawn up. I saw Grant enter, throw himself into the chair which I had left vacant, stretch his arms out on the table, and lay his head upon them, like one in agonies of grief. He was bewailing the loss of the happiness which I had won.

I pitied him, but I hated him. It seemed to me that if this man set his heart upon a woman's love, sooner or later she must give it to him. What would it be if now he used all his power to rob me of Viola? I knew that till the ring was on her finger I should have no peace of mind.

The next day, when I paid my visit to Viola, I was full of the fear that I should find Eustace Grant at her side, perhaps exercising all his craft. In spite of his assumption of frankness, I believed him to be crafty, to my disadvantage. It was a fear which had no foundation. Neither on that day nor on succeeding days did Grant in any way interfere with my monopoly of Viola.

Once or twice I met him, apparently coming from the house. On these occasions he bowed gravely, but did not stop to speak. His visits were evidently paid at such times as did not clash with mine. I raged inwardly to think that he had a right to visit Viola at any time; but I was too proud to remonstrate. It was some comfort to me to hear Miss Rossiter occasionally remark that they saw little or nothing of Eustace now.

Viola seldom mentioned his name. No doubt, with a woman's quickness, she understood that it was distasteful to me. Nevertheless, I knew that she held her guardian in the greatest esteem, and looked forward to the time when we should be friends. This I swore should never come.

Viola once my wife, the acquaintance between her and this strong-willed, attractive man should cease.

As I said, I am indeed a pitiful hero! But if I saw nothing of Grant I heard from him. He wrote me, telling me he had been informed by Miss Keith that our marriage was to take place very shortly. He would be glad to know my intentions respecting the settlement of her own small fortune. There was a perceptiveness about the wording of the letter which nettled me extremely. I wrote back that it was quite true we were to be married in a few weeks' time, but that it was not my intention to settle my wife's money upon her. The sum was too paltry to trouble about, as it would be quite lost sight of in the large post-nuptial settlement which I proposed making. If Mr. Grant felt any doubt as to my

means he could make inquiries of my solicitor, who had my instructions to answer all his questions fully.

To this letter he did not reply; but I heard that he made the inquiries, as I suggested. No doubt, in Viola's interest, he was right in so doing; but I liked him none the more for the action.

Yes, Viola, overcome by my impassioned prayer, had consented to an almost immediate marriage. There was, indeed, no reason why we should wait a day. She loved me, and was willing to trust her future in my hands. I loved her, and longed for the moment which would make her mine forever. Moreover, I longed for the time to come when I might tell her all; confess the innocent but foolish deception I had practiced, and beg her forgiveness—not for mistrusting her, but for her sex in general. I was sorely tempted to reveal the true state of affairs without further delay; but Grant's warning rose to my mind, and I determined that, until the irrevocable words were spoken, I would keep my secret.

We were married in the quietest way possible. Viola, it seemed to me, had no bosom friends—no relatives who would be mortified unless they were asked to the wedding. The old spinster, who looked very prim, and ready to apply her favorite word, "indecorous," to the whole proceedings; a brother, as prim as herself, and one trusted friend of my own formed the wedding guests. Eustace Grant had been asked to accompany us, but Viola told me that, for some reason or another, he had excused himself. At this she seemed greatly vexed.

I was also troubled by his refusal. It showed too plainly his feelings, both toward me and toward Viola; he was there even before I was. As I walked up the aisle I caught a glimpse of his strongly-marked profile. He was in a far-off pew, and was almost the only spectator of the

ceremony. Doubtless, when Viola and I left the church, man and wife, Eustace Grant walked into the vestry, and, as he had expressed his intention of doing, saw with his own eyes that I had married Viola in my true name.

We drove straight from the church to the railway station. When alone in the carriage almost the first words my wife said were: "Julian, Eustace was in church. Did you see him?"

"Yes, I saw him."

"Why did he not come and wish me good-bye? It was not like him. I must have offended him. I will write and ask him how."

I hated the idea of Eustace Grant being, in such a moment as this, uppermost in my wife's thoughts. "Never mind, dearest," I said. "What is Eustace Grant to us?"

"Oh, much, very much to me, Julian! He was my mother's friend, he has been my one friend ever since I can remember."

"I do not like him," I said.

"But you will like him; you must like him. He is so good, so noble, so clever. Promise me, Julian, you will like him for my sake."

Although I would not credit him with the two first qualifications—goodness and nobility—I was willing to believe that Eustace Grant was clever—perhaps too clever. The disadvantage at which he had held me upon that night when I was for the time, in his eyes, an impostor, rankled in my mind. But to-day I could afford to be generous. I drew Viola close to me.

"Dearest," I said, "I will try and get rid of my prejudice. I will try and forget that this man loved you, and would have made you his wife. I will try to cease from wondering why, when he is so good, noble and clever, you should have chosen me."

Viola laid her soft cheek against mine.

"Julian, my husband," she whispered, "are you not all that Eustace Grant is—and more. I love you."

With her words all my doubt, all my fear of Eustace Grant fled—never, I hoped, to return. With Viola's arms round me, her kisses on my lips, I could afford to pity my unsuccessful rival. When we were installed in the compartment of the train which was, by a venal arrangement of the guard's, reserved to ourselves, I fell to considering how I should best make known to Viola that the name by which she had hitherto known me was assumed. I was beginning, or fancied I was beginning, to know something of my wife's true nature; and I told myself that the task before me was not so easy as I had once imagined it would be. My confession was hurried on by a question she herself asked me:

"Julian, what name was it you signed in the book at church?"

I had hoped that in the agitation natural to a bride who signs her maiden name for the last time she had not noticed my autograph. But she must have done so, although she had said nothing about it until now.

So I made the plunge and told her all. Told her my true name; told her of the beautiful house in the west which would be ours; told her of the life, free from care and anxiety as to the future, which stretched before us. Then I besought her forgiveness for keeping her in ignorance of these things. I had, he said, given her to understand that I was a man with an income just enough to live upon in comfort.

Grant was right. He knew Viola when he told me that, by revealing my deception, he might destroy the fabric of my happiness. She said little, but her look told me she was hurt and wounded. I verily believe her first thoughts were that she would rather I had been what I represented myself to be, than to have the power of sharing such a home and so much wealth with her. How little men understand women! Perhaps because no two women are alike.

But Viola forgave me. A woman always forgives the man she loves, but I knew that she was sad at the thought that I could have dreamed that riches might have influenced her. Nevertheless, it was days before I could get her to join me unrestrainedly in the schemes which I wove of our future life.

We went down to a quiet watering place on the south coast. Here we staid for a fortnight. Oh, those sweet summer days! Shall I ever forget them! For the time there seemed no cloud which could possibly shade our joy. All the cynical, suspicious, uncharitable elements seemed swept out of my nature. I told myself that the constant society of the wife I loved was making a better as well as a happier man of me.

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